DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 917 SO 012 406

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TITLE Are Social Education and Compulsory Education Compatible? Barely.
PUB DATE Nov 79
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, College and University Faculty Assembly (Portland, OR, November 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Compulsory Education; Conflict; Critical Thinking; Democracy; Educational Change; Educational History; *Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; Government (Administrative Body); Power Structure; *Public Education; Relevance (Education); *Social Studies; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A tension exists between the goals of social education and the nature of the compulsory school system. Compulsory education was established late in the 19th century as a response to the trend toward an urban industrial society. The industrial world required workers who were punctual, attentive, and quiet; thus, compulsory education was seen as a means by which children could be instilled with those attributes. Modern education continues to promote attitudes which reflect the establishment. Social studies was introduced as a field of instruction early in the 20th century. Ironically, its goals of conceptually-based teaching, inquiry, relevance to students, and valuing processes are rarely achieved in practical classroom situations. The tension between social studies and the educational system exists in their conflicting premises: the educational system stresses patriotic obedience and reliance on the present institutions of government, whereas social studies goals emphasize development of free-thinking individuals who are critical of all forms of statism and believe in flexible, decentralized, democratic forms of government. As a step toward reconciling differences between the two, teachers will have to regard teaching as a positive subversive activity: encourage students to critically examine conventional conceptions of politics, economics, and social issues; and support curricula that promote critical inquiry. (AV)

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ARE SOCIAL EDUCATION AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION COMPATIBLE? BARELY.

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SO 012 406

Paper presented at the National Council for the Social Studies Meeting, College and University Faculty Assembly, Portland, Oregon

November 1979

ARE SOCIAL EDUCATION AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION COMPATIBLE? BARELY.

I

In spite of public opposition on varied grounds, compulsory schooling legislation spread nationally after the Civil War. The first general compulsory school attendance law, enacted in Massachusetts in 1852, required that all children attend school 12 weeks each year. These Massachusetts provisions served as a common model for early legislation in other states. By the turn of the century 32 states had such laws on the books. The southern states were last, but between 1915 and 1918 seven states of the Deep South passed legislation, thus completing the national picture.

My understanding of this trend is that compulsory schooling was one small part of the educational institution's response to the vastly altered social and economic conditions confronting the United States in the last half of the nineteenth century. The United States was rapidly shifting from an agricultural, rural, small-scale entrepreneurial base toward an urban, industrial, large-scale corporate base. In the search for new work leading toward a better life, millions left the farming communities for the cities and millions more left Europe for America. Americans were being forced to cope with immense changes in the economic and demographic foundations of their society. Since schools are not an autonomous force

and since they do react to the flux of events around them, we might expect that they would respond strongly to the urbanizing, industrializing society which was emerging. In 1877 Iowa's State Superintendent could still modestly circumscribe the purpose of schooling: "to secure that limited knowledge which the State has a right to demand, including, the Superintendent thinks, scarcely anything except reading, writing, and the fundamental rules of arithmetic." Such a minimal conception of education, however, was already in the process of being superceded. Three years earlier seventy-seven "Leading Educators" had prepared a statement which described a new set of educational goals: "Great stress is laid upon (1) punctuality, (2) regularity, (3) attention, and (4) silence, as habits necessary through life for successful combination with one's fellowmen in an industrial and commercial civilization." School officials were beginning to stress that classroom activities should inculcate those values thought to make good industrial workers.

The growing industrialization of the nation's economy was seen as requiring modifications in personal behavior; indeed, it requrired new life styles. To be effective, though, adaptation to an industrial economy had to reach all the children. It was apparent to advocates of this adaptation that children could not be depended upon to voluntarily submit to a regimen of punctuality, regularity, attention and silence in schools when the alternatives were passing the time in the streets or making money on a job.

And so by 1910 all but a handful of the states had accepted the economic logic of compulsory schooling. In the preceding thirty years education had been fashioned into what has been called an "increasingly refined training and selection mechanism for the labor force." In

nineteenth century America, as in other agrarian societies, no device was needed to absorb an excess labor force; farming was a highly labor-intensive industry demanding all available hands. But by the early twentieth century the complexity of jobs engendered by the Industrial Revolution seemed to dictate that the youth of the country be marched through the ranks of the public schools. Compulsory education laws, inefficient as they were in the beginning, laid the groundwork for a rationalized and systematized sort of education which would attempt to adapt all children to the economic necessities of the twentieth century.

There is, however, another important perspective on compulsory school attendance legislation. There is some evidence that such legislation had little if any actual effect on school attendance. In 1891 the U. S. Commissioner of Education reported:

> Except in Connecticut and in certain municipalities in perhaps a dozen other States, compulsory laws have been entirely inoperative, and have had no effect on attendance one way or the other, except it may be a temporary one immediately following their first enactment; in some cases their very existence is unknown or has been forgotten by most persons. . . In a word, the influence of compulsory laws upon school attendance has been either zero, or else so slight that in the most favorable cases it may be more than neutralized by such agencies as /a contagious disease or an inclement season/.

Two scholars, writing for the Office of Education in 1935, contended that, "On the whole the increased interest of the public in education may be regarded as the predominant cause of better school attendance." They supported their statement with statistics that showed the proportion of young people below and above the usual compulsory attendance ages who were attending school increased as well as the children within the compulsory age brackets. These data suggest that a generalized American faith in the value of schooling--independent of compulsory-school

legislation--operated to increase enrollment and attendance. It may well be that the issue of compulsory education was nugatory, having little or no consequence, insofar as education was concerned, but was significant chiefly as a test of the legitimate extent of the State's power over its citizens.

At about the same time the last state passed its compulsory education laws, Randolph Bourne, a literary essayist and critic wrote, "The state is the organization of the herd to act offensively or defensively against another herd similarly organized." The herd--or state--was now mandating education through political means, thereby enormously increasing its reach into the lives of Americans. Its goal? The youth of the country were to emerge as armies of literate, trained, and well-socialized citizens, conditioned to insure the stability of the corporate state. Dangers exist in any kind of organized education, but especially in a system mandated and controlled by the state. Gandhi once wrote:

> I look upon an increase in the power of the State with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.
> The state represents violence in concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul but as the State is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.

The danges inherent in our link as social studies educators to this compulsory school system, based on the coercive power of the state, are ones we commonly ignore.

II

The social studies achieved recognition as a field of instruction at about the same time as compulsory school laws were finally enacted in

all the states. Not only compulsory education but social studies education as well emerged and fastened a grip on American educational institutions in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Largely through the efforts of the NEA's Committee on Social Studies and its 1916 report, this new area gained legitimacy as an important part of the curriculum. But its stated purposes--its reasons for existence--have never been matched by its observable outcomes. From the first, educators typically professed as goals for the social studies long lists of comprehensive objectives which were manifestly unobtainable. More recently Elliott and Kennedy's study of "Australian Impressions of Social Studies Theory and Practice in Secondary Schools in the United States" suggests a wide disparity between what our leading social studies educators emphasize--conceptually based teaching, multidisciplinary focus, inquiry, relevance to students, and valuing processes--and what normally goes on in school classrooms. Surveys of students' (and adult citizens') understanding of social studies knowledge have rather consistently produced dismaying results. We display limited ability as citizens to adequately deal with war, inflation, racism, and the other ominous signs of our social ineptitude.

Thoughtful social studies educators have expressed their doubts about the viability of the curriculum. Robert Hanvey has characterized the "important curriculum in the social studies" as a "null curriculum," empty and sterile. He asked:

> Can a state make its way in the international environment if it cannot count on a large number of docile, essentially uneducated young men who defer to authority and who can be easily persuaded of the legitimacy of national policies and actions. Nations act amorally and justify themselves in moral terms. But if high school graduates were truly educated the justifications would be easily penetrated. The fundamental question is: Can a nation survive if its young people are well educated?

Jim Shaver has contended that:

> Education for rational citizenship seems foredoomed to continue as a step-sister to history and social science instruction. Perhaps this is just as well. For, contrary to our assumptions, the intense involvement of a citizenry effectively schooled and interested in the analysis of public issues might be too disruptive to our society.

Perhaps the richest formulation of social studies pedagogy to date was the Progressive Education for which John Dewey was the spokesman. Yet for all its democratic and social values, that curriculum never questioned the essential rightness and rationality of urban industrial society. Rather, it took industrialism as its framework and tried to civilize the system. As a result, Dewey's emphasis on popular competence and pragmatic experimentation has easily flowed into a curriculum that has integrated schools all the more tightly into what Theodore Roszak calls the "lethal orthodoxy of the modern world." I suppose all this is another way of saying the medium is indeed the message. The pieties we share with one another about the goals and emphases of the social studies carry a cargo of meaning and feeling that exceeds the known reality of the schools.

III

There are a lot of things which are good if one does them because he or she chooses to--things which may become more or less bad if doing them is compulsory. I would argue getting an education is one of these things. The dynamics of the school have been described as an instrument of power. Power generates antagonism and interferes with learning and teaching. (John Holt wrote several years ago that children learn best when they are curious, confident, energetic, when they have something to say about what they are learning and why, when they are not threatened, humiliated and judged.) Thus there exists a tension between social education as we

wish it and the compulsory school system as we find it. The issue becomes whether it will be a creative tension or a debilitating one. Until we recognize and acknowledge this tension, it will continue to undermine even the best of our efforts.

Frances FitzGerald, in her series of articles in the New Yorker earlier this year quoted Bertrand Russell, "the whole conception of truth is one which is difficult to reconcile with the usual ideals of citizenship," if only because "it is impossible to instill the scientific spirit into the young so long as any propositions are regarded as sacrosanct and not open to question." FitzGerald went on to say that "instead of fighting this battle, the New Social Studies advocates retreated into their role as technicians, experts in pedagogy." We service the system, obtain our rewards from it, and consequently are reluctant to question its legitimacy.

The basic dilemma, it seems to me, is this: we have arrayed on the one hand a system of nationalistic education stressing patriotic obedience and reliance on the present institutions of government. On the other hand we find arrayed in the most powerful statements of social studies purpose a movement toward educating people who have few illusions yet are not disillusioned, who are critical of all forms of statism, who believe in a decentralized , democratic form of government in which the state does not scare the individual into obedience but leaves intact the dignity of the individual, and who continue to ask questions, grow, and seek meaning for themselves.

IV

Can the social studies and compulsory education be reconciled? Not easily and not without pain. Some argue to give up the effort, and advocate doing away with schooling (e.g., Ivan Illich) or ignoring the system (e.g.,

John Holt's growing without schooling movement). The majority of us, however, will continue to work toward social studies goals within the framework of compulsory schooling because that is where millions of young people are to be found. Can we operate honorably as social studies educators without capitulating to the system of state education which serves as our arena? Can we promote an education for young people that encourages them to question and modify the system so that they can make more and more decisions for themselves at the same time they grow up within its coercive, frequently antagonistic bounds?

We can--to a limited degree--but only with a sense of the inevitable tensions which must exist. If social studies goals are to be even partially operational within the present system, several things will have to happen: Teachers will have to become familiar with the notion of teaching as a subversive activity (in the positive sense Postman and Weingartner developed it). They will need to seek ways to dilute the power with which they are invested by the state in the classroom without at the same time abandoning responsibility as adults and teachers. They will need to encourage students to critically examine conventional conceptions of politics, economics, and pressing social issues which are frequently assumed uncritically. If we can agree that the free play of the mind is indispensable to the existence of a tolerable human society, we will construct and support curricula that promote critical inquiry, even regarding the institutions that maintain us.

One final consideration. The best educated persons are always those who want to be. So the job of teachers is not to "transmit the cultural heritage," but to do as much as they can to stir the hunger to know. It does not exist spontaneously in the many, but only in the few. This is the burden educators bear, and there is no help for it. It is not only our burden but our work bench too, and if the prospect does not attract us, we ought to find something else to do.